United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Baker City Office
3165 10th Street
Baker City, Oregon 97814-1408
http://www.or.blm.gov/Vale/

IN REPLY REFER TO:
5700/1790

December 5, 2002

Dear Concerned Citizen:

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Baker Resource Area of the Vale District, is planning activities in the Cove area (see enclosed map). This letter is to inform you of these proposals and to solicit your comments so that they may be considered in the planning process.

Project Area Description

The proposed project is located on scattered BLM tracts southeast of Cove, Oregon. The legal description of the project area is as follows: T.3 S., R.40 E., Sec. 25 and 35; T.4 S., R.40 E., Sec. 1; T.3 S., R.41 E., Sec. 31 and 32; and T. 4 S., R. 41 E., Sec 5. These parcels are all near urban interface zones.

The Cove treatment area is comprised of 480 acres characterized by warm dry forest types in the lower elevations and cool dry forest types in the higher elevations. Representative warm dry forest tree species are; ponderosa pine, western larch, and Douglas fir. Cool dry forest tree species include; white fir, Douglas fir, western larch, lodgepole pine, and ponderosa pine. Most of this forested land contains fuel loads generated primarily by dense forest stands with ladder fuels from heavy shrub understory and low branched trees, bark beetle killed trees, and previous logging activities.

Purpose and Need for the Action

The purpose of the project primarily is to reduce fuel loads that currently impose a high risk of stand replacement fire; particularly as such a fire would impact urban interface areas. Subsidiary goals include improving stand health, reducing the incidence of insect and disease problems within the stands, and encouraging the growth of desirable hardy tree species.

Forest stands within the proposed project area are quite dense, and most of these stands have suffered from insect and disease-related tree mortality. Historically, wildfire acted as a natural thinning agent within these stands, and the removal of fire as an ecosystem maintenance agent has resulted in the accumulation of large quantities of fuel. This fuel, much of which is ladder fuel, is comprised both of dead trees and a dense understory of young trees and ninebark. These dense stand conditions have reduced stand vigor and dramatically increased susceptibility to insect infestation.

Three of the tracts had significant mortality during the spruce budworm epidemic in the late 1980's and this mortality was removed in the Barrel Springs sale in 1993. In the remainder of the area, the most prominent fuel-creating mortality agent has been bark beetles killing stressed trees in overstocked stands.

While the most prominent fuel-creating mortality agent in the area has been bark beetles and spruce budworm, some stands also are moderately infected with dwarf mistletoe. This dwarf mistletoe also can reduce tree vigor and predispose infected trees to bark beetle attack. Such bark beetle attack likely would result in increased mortality and consequent fuel creation. Many trees in the project area show signs of bark beetle infestation.

As stated above, past logging activities on BLM lands has contributed to fuel accumulation. As a result of these logging operations, slash was created and left on the ground. This slash presents a fire hazard both to the private land and to the BLM-administered parcels, over and above the hazards created by the dead trees on BLM land.

Preliminary Proposed Action

The proposed action is designed to address the fire hazard and forest health concerns of the Cove area. To accomplish this task, proposed treatments consist of fuels treatment using mechanical methods such as a"slash buster" to decrease the amount of understory shrub vegetation and slash, commercial thinning, and prescribed burning to reduce accumulated fuels.

Design Features

Design features are actions taken as part of a proposal to reduce or avoid negative effects of a proposed action. Many of the design features are taken from the Baker Resource Management Plan (RMP), the land use plan that provides overall guidance for activities on BLM administered lands in the Baker Resource Area.

Snag and down log retention: Retention of down logs and snags upon which wildlife relies would follow RMP guidelines. At least 3 large (at least 21 inch diameter at breast height (dbh)) snags per acre, and 5-10 down logs per acre, 20 feet in length, with 12-inch small end diameter would be retained.

Avoidance of sensitive species habitat: If northern goshawk, cougar, or other sensitive wildlife species were found in the project area, these species habitat would be avoided. In general, treatments would be scheduled and/or modified to avoid or minimize disturbance these wildlife species and their habitat. Section 32, T. 3 S., R. 41 E. and Sec 5, T. 4 S., R. 41 E. are considered Canadian lynx habitat and modifications to such habitat will be consulted upon with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Slash pile burning: Slash piles would be burned in late fall or early winter after several inches of snow have fallen. This would minimize the risk of fire spread as well as impact to soils.

Streamside buffers: Streamside buffers would be implemented to protect riparian habitat. The proposed buffers are 150 feet on each side of perennial non-fish bearing streams and 50 feet on each side of intermittent streams. If future analysis reveals a need to enter these areas in order to protect or enhance riparian habitat, some low-impact activities may be proposed.

Vegetation manipulation: Treatments would be designed to create a vegetation mosaic in areas with crucial wildlife habitat. Areas in which major vegetation manipulation occurs, and rehabilitation is necessary, would be deferred from livestock grazing for at least two to five growing seasons following treatment. Areas disturbed by treatments would be reseeded with native grasses, forbs and shrubs in accordance with habitat requirements.

Cultural resources: Cultural resources will be assessed and inventoried, and will be avoided during treatment.

Preliminary Issues and Concerns

Preliminary issues were identified during the development of the proposal. Some of these issues have been addressed through the design features mentioned above, while others require additional attention. These issues include:

- The potential degradation of riparian habitat due to timber harvesting is a concern. This concern has been addressed by mandating the use of streamside buffers.
- The loss of big game cover also is a concern. Thinning forest stands will reduce the amount of cover available.
- Soils and watershed issues are at stake, particularly because of logging that has taken place on the parcels surrounding the project area. This issue will be addressed by using streamside buffers, subject to entry in order to achieve riparian habitat objectives, by reseeding treatment areas and by using other effective erosion control measures so as to prevent or minimize both soil disturbance and the effect of that disturbance on the watershed.
- The presence of cultural sites within the project area is a concern, although this concern would be addressed by a strict policy of cultural site avoidance during treatment.
- The presence of Canadian lynx habitat in the project area is a concern. Steps will be taken to ensure that proper consultation procedures are completed and modifications to habitat characteristics will be allowed only under concurrence with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
- The location and proximity of residential houses and structures to the project area and the risk of destruction by wildfire. This issue is addressed through the intent of the project; to reduce the risk of wildfire to the residential dwellings and structures through forest and fuels treatment management.

Your Comments and Concerns

At this time, the Cove Fuels Treatment Project is being examined and analyzed so as to delineate those management actions that would be most appropriate for and beneficial to all components of the Project Area ecosystems. The overall goal of the analysis is to address fire hazards and forest health in a way that will result in the improved health of these ecosystems.

Comments, including names and addresses of respondents, will be available for public review at the identified administrative office during regular business hours (8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m), Monday through Friday, except holidays, and may be published as a part of the EA document or other related documents. Individual respondents may request confidentiality.

If you wish to withhold your name or street address from public review or from disclosure under the Freedom of Information Act, you must state this prominently at the beginning of your written comment. Such requests will be honored to the extent allowed by law.

All submissions from organizations or businesses, and from individuals identifying themselves as representatives or officials of organizations or businesses, will be made available for public inspection in their entirety.

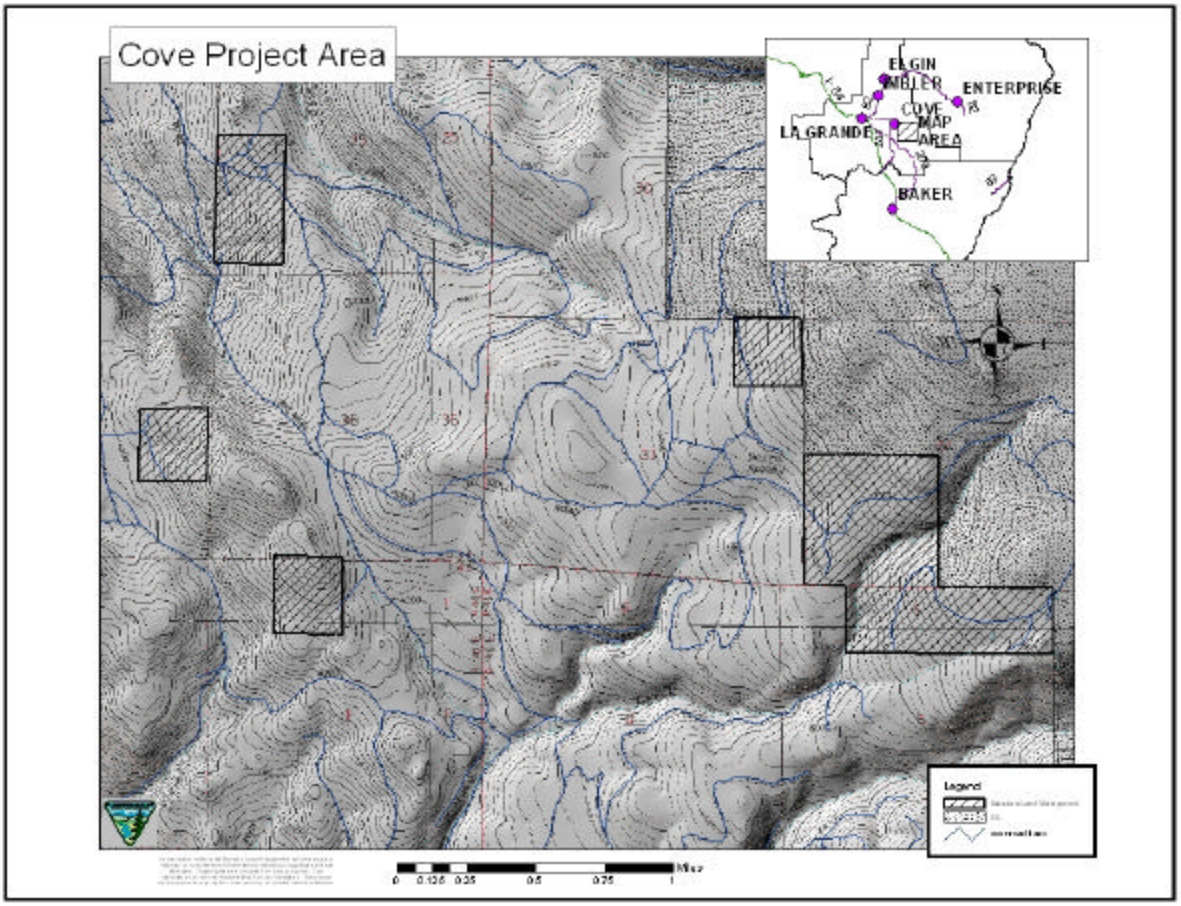
The BLM values public input into the planning process because the differing perspectives of members of the public may help in the identification of issues and concerns that we may have overlooked. I welcome your comments, suggestions, ideas and concerns regarding this proposal. Please send your written feedback to our Team Lead, Greg Miller, at the above address
by January 6, 2002. Further, if you have any additional questions, kindly contact Mr. Miller by mail, by phone at (541) 523-1301, or by e-mail at **Greg_Miller@blm.gov**.

Sincerely,

/s/ Ted Davis (for)

Penelope Dunn Woods
Field Manager

Enclosure: map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